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OBJECTIVE LIFE EVENTS, PERCEPTIONS, AND HEALTH. (U)
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NAVLHTRSCMC-76-76

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UNCLASSIFIED

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AD A100066

REF ID:
A71274

Objective Life Events, Perceptions, and Health

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Abstract

Research on the pathological effects of stressful life events and the many controversial issues confronting life stress researchers have been reviewed recently in a number of volumes (Apely & Trumbull, 1967; Dodge & Martin, 1970, Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Gunderson & Rahe, 1974; Levi, 1971, Levine & Scotch, 1970; McGrath, 1970). Long-term studies of stressful or disruptive life events and health changes are needed in order to identify particular life stressors that have importance for disease etiology and, further, to understand the complex interactions between stressful events and adaptive processes, leading in some cases to the onset of illness and in some cases not. This area of research is critical for the development of effective preventive efforts.

One important issue is the role of individual perception or cognition in intensifying or reducing the pathological effects of stressful events. That is, in addition to simply recording an event objectively, is it important to assess the subjective meaning of the event to the individual? Many investigators (e.g., Hudgens, 1974) have taken the position that assessing individual perceptions is essential while others contend that this procedure

merely introduces a great deal of measurement error. Brown (1974) has made a number of suggestions for controlling error introduced by self-reports of life events and their meanings. In particular, he emphasized the usefulness of what he called contextual measures--the investigator's descriptions of biographical circumstances surrounding events which exclude accounts of personal reactions to the events. The author takes the approach that this question of the importance of perceptions is an empirical one, requiring an analysis of the sources of variance in perceptions of life stresses and the correlations of underlying components of these perceptions with behavior criteria such as illness. Such a procedure, utilizing an analysis of variance and regression analysis framework, has been applied to the analysis of various environmental stressors aboard Navy ships (Pugh, 1975). This procedure should be carried out after it has been established by means of objective data that certain life events affect illness rate.

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Accession For	
NTIS GRA&I	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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Justification	
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SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER 76-76	2. GQVT ACCESSION NO. <i>AD-A100 258</i>	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) Objective Life Events, Perceptions, and Health	5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Final	
7. AUTHOR(s) E. K. Eric GUNDERSON	8. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER	
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Health Research Center P.O. Box 85122 San Diego, CA 92138	10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS MF51.524.002-5019	
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Medical Research & Development Command National Naval Medical Center Bethesda, MD 20014	12. REPORT DATE November 1976	
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office) Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Department of the Navy Washington, DC 20372	13. NUMBER OF PAGES 3 (Abstract w/refs)	
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report) Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.	15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified	
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report) Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) Life changes Perceived stress Etiology Naval personnel		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) ✓Research on the pathological effects of stressful life events and the many controversial issues confronting life stress researchers have been reviewed recently in a number of volumes. Long-term studies of stressful or disruptive life events and health changes are needed in order to identify particular life stressors that have importance for disease etiology, etc. Procedures should be carried out after it has been established by means of objective data that certain life events affect illness rate. ←		

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